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SUBJECT: New German Agriculture Minister Likely to Follow
Seehofer's Positions on Trade and Agriculture

¶1. (U) Summary. Ilse Aigner has been appointed as the German Minister for Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection, replacing Horst Seehofer who has returned to Bavaria as Minister President. It is unclear how this change will affect Germany's agricultural and trade policy decisions in the coming year. In Bavaria, Helmut Brunner, the new state agriculture minister will likely continue to push anti-biotech policies. Seehofer leaves a mixed result from his 3-year tenure as German Agricultural Minister. ConGen Munich is reporting septel on Seehofer and his new Bavarian Government. End Summary.

A New Agriculture Minister is Named

¶2. (U) On October 31, Ilse Aigner assumed responsibilities as the new Federal Minister for Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection (BMELV) in Germany. Aigner is a member of the Bavarian Christian Social Union and takes over the post from Horst Seehofer, the new Bavarian Minister President. CSU was allocated this position in the Federal Cabinet under the agreement that established the German Grand Coalition Government in late 2005.

¶3. (SBU) Ilse Aigner is single, 43 years old and represents Starnberg and the surrounding countryside, a rural area near Munich that is one of Germany's most affluent. She has been a Bundestag member since 1998. Aigner is an electrician by training and in the past has worked with helicopter development. As a member of the Bundestag, Aigner has most recently been the deputy chairperson of the ethics committee. In this role, she has been involved in German debate on stem cell research. In those debates, she demanded more liberal conditions for the German stem cell researchers. She has been a member of the budget committee and the research and education committee in the Bundestag. In the budget committee Aigner, was the rapporteur for agriculture. German federal officials say that in this role she gained a thorough understanding of the administration and programs of BMELV. She was described as tough and is regarded by at least some in the German Government as a good choice to lead BMELV at least until the 2009 elections. Her biography can be found at diplomedia.state.gov/index.php?title=Ilse_Aigner.

¶4. (U) Aigner is considered to be a promising young CSU politician. While congratulating Aigner on her new duties, the German Farmers Association was not effusive in welcoming her. Aigner is unlikely to change German policies regarding the Common Agricultural Policy Health Check or commitment to a successful conclusion of the Doha negotiations. Aigner already stated that she will not break away from Seehofer's relatively negative stance on agricultural biotechnology application but stressed the importance of research in this field. Some suspect that Seehofer will continue to exert strong influence on agricultural policy decision making in Berlin when it touches Bavarian interests, especially since he handpicked Aigner as his replacement. One such area will be EU changes to the milk quota and how the dairy industry in Bavaria might be compensated.

In Bavaria, Environment Trumps Agriculture

¶5. (SBU) For the Bavarian cabinet, Seehofer nominated Markus Soeder as the next Minister for Health and Environment (Bavarian Cabinet choices report in detail Septel). Soeder and Seehofer have been the leading opponents to cultivation of biotech crops throughout Germany in the past two years. For Soeder, this position could provide him a platform to promote an anti-biotech agenda. Insiders expect that 41-year-old Soeder will try to position himself as counterweight to Sigmar Gabriel, the current Federal Minister of the Environment. For Bavaria's Agriculture Minister, Seehofer selected Helmut Brunner, a 54-year-old farmer who has been a member of the Bavarian parliament for 14 years. He was also the chairperson of the agricultural committee in the Bavarian parliament. However, according to insiders, he kept a low profile in this position. Brunner was chosen, in part, because of his Lower Bavarian roots helped to provide regional balance, an important consideration in CSU politics.

Seehofer as Agricultural Minister

¶6. (SBU) During his tenure as Federal Agricultural Minister, Horst Seehofer often went against recommendations of his Ministry and party on contentious issues. For example, despite publicly supporting the use of green biotechnology during the very early part of his term, Seehofer's enthusiasm waned as the Green Party and non-governmental organizations intensified their anti-biotech campaigns. By the end of his term, Seehofer had determined the political costs of support for agricultural biotechnology were too great given his longer term political aspirations.

¶7. (SBU) As Agricultural Minister, Seehofer opposed the

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Transatlantic Economic Council's (TEC) initiative to resolve the U.S./EU poultry dispute. Seizing on strong opposition from agricultural groups and consumers, Seehofer positioned himself as the consumers' advocate and fought against lifting the ban on U.S. poultry. Seehofer supported the WTO negotiations for further trade liberalization, but he also understood that Germany's agricultural sector is apprehensive about the impact on subsidies. Seehofer often stated that he believed it was important to ensure that farmers were not hurt socially and economically by any trade agreement.

¶8. (U) Seehofer's advocacy for social issues played well with his agricultural constituents and often kept him in the media spotlight. One such issue involved the German dairy strike of summer 2008, which was centered in Bavaria. While Seehofer did not publicly support the strike, he supported the farmers' demands for a quote fair unquote milk price and was reported to have promised to work against a further quota increase in Brussels. He also convened German milk summit and called for the creation of an EU milk fund to support dairy farms in disadvantaged areas. His action not only strengthened his ties to the large groups of predominantly small Bavarian farmers, the CSU, and the German Farmers Union, but more importantly allowed him to maintain his popularity in Bavaria.

¶9. (U) Embassy Berlin coordinated this cable with Consulate General Munich.

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